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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a student centered, integrated curriculum that was developed at an English comprehensive school for 14- to 18-year-old students and shows how English was taught within this curriculum. Sections of the paper discuss (1) the historical roots of the problem of curriculum organization that the school faced; (2) the organizational solution that was used--constructing a series of subschools based on student self-selection, depending on team teaching, and using teachers as tutors; (3) the epistemological solution, which points out how the team teaching concept and the organization of the curriculum gave the learner the control and responsibility for language development; (4) the role of English in this curricular scheme; (5) the problems for English instruction that existed in this integrated curriculum; and (6) the safeguards that can be used to ensure proper attention to language development and adequate English instruction in curriculum designs like the one described. (RI)

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ENGLISH IN AN INTEGRATED CURRICULUM - Practice at Countesthorpe College, Leics., by JOHN WATTS, Principal, Countesthorpe College, former Chairman of N.A.T.E.

> "Strong frames reduce the power of the pupil over what, when and how he recieves his knowledge." - Bernstein. Class, Codes and Control Granada 1973

1. The Problem that Countesthorpe identified and faced in 1970, was that of offering each student, in a 14-18 comprehensive school, the maximum autonomy of study and choice of personal curriculum (i.e. weakening the 'frames') without loss of identity, group membership and a sense of coherence. The initial invitations to students demonstrated rapidly that an excess of choice will be bewildering. Countesthorpe was forced in its first two years of existence to hasten the evolution of a system that would strike the right balance, if it was not to lurch through a series of disasters into a return to the status quo, the 'tried and approved methods' so-called. That of course has been the fate of all ill-prepared innovations.

The history of that early stage has been recounted elsewhere (The Countesthorpe Experience ed. John Watts, Allen and Unwin 1975). What evolved was a system that I shall outline in this paper. The problem that this system attempted to solve was not however just an organisational one : it was the central one of how the general run of adolescents might make coherent sense of studies which too commonly have appeared to them fragmented, incoherent and with little bearing upon their concerns and aspirations. We have raised the school-leaving age in my lifetime from fourteen to sixteen, creating a whole new category of the population, obliged without precedent to follow a given curriculum, while being deprived of the wage and partial adult status enjoyed by former generations. They have been compelled to join groups they have not chosen for company, to be in places they have not asked to go to, at times laid down by somebody else, to be given information they have not

sought, by teachers they have not opted to learn from. The wonder is that they have not broken out in open rebellion. It is perhaps sadder that they have sighed, complied, and in large measure judged it to be a boring irrelevance.

2. The Organisational solution which was arrived at in 1972 was to construct a series of sub-schools ('teams' in our vernacular). On arrival at the age of fourteen, students form 'teams' of about 100 to 150 in number, largely governed by friendship groups and the advice of staff at the feeder schools, but as far as possible so that each team reflects in smaller scale the range of intake across the whole school. Each team has its own clearly contained base in the school, with amenities for study, lockers, toilets and pegs. It is a sub-school within the school. A team is subdivided into tutorial groups, and the tutors, five or six of them, offer a set of specialisms that will include between them English, Maths, and Social Studies. Those teachers work and plan as a unit, keeping the same student membership for the two years fourteen to sixteen. After two years the students either leave school or join the sixth form, and the staff receive a new intake.

Teams operate for a long session extending over half of each day. The tutors organise work, establishing between them a rhythm of activities engaging at different times individuals, small groups, class-sized groups (20-30) or the whole team. (Each team has in its cluster of spaces one in which all its members can assemble.) There is consequently a wide range of kinds of work that may go on in a team, with choices to be made by each student in negotiation with first their personal tutor and then others among the remaining four or five. The personal tutor is also responsible for constructing with each student in the tutorial group a personal curriculum and timetable covering both team-time and the other half of the day out and about in the other departments. The more adventurous student's timetable will eat into team-time, while some will add to their team-time. Only rarely and by chance will two

students end up with identical programmes. The permutation of subject combinations is limited ultimately by the master-timetable, not by the class or stream or course that the student belongs to.

The team therefore provides each student with Stability, Challenge and Contract. Stability is afforded by membership of a small unit, not just a 'house' or a group that meets daily only for registration and notices, but one that forms the central arrangement for work and spare time. Students arrive in team before school, may stay there at breaks and lunch hour: there is always at least one of the team tutors on duty. If a breakdown of any sort occurs during the day, students return to the team. They drop-in rather than drop-out. A student may arrange to change tutor within the team, and this happens from time to time after negotiations, often thereby resolving a personal conflict before it becomes critical. Technically, a student may apply to transfer to another team, following friendship changes, but it is a comment on the strength of the team's social cohesion that this rarely happens. 'Floaters' form fewer than one per cent of any age group.

This stability and close contact with tutors make possible the challenge of a wide range of curriculum options. Under guidance and from the secure base of the team, each student handles more diversity than was originally thought possible. Their personal timetable is essentially a contract. It may not be altered or departed from unilaterally, but is open to renegotiation. That renegotiation may lead to an alteration of times and need only involve that student, the tutor and the teachers affected : it may lead to a change of subjects and will then involve the parents as well. If it can't be arranged, all can see why : if it can be arranged, and it is agreed to be to the student's advantage, then it is. The basic membership of team and tutor group remains unaltered so that readjustment and attendant anxiety is minimal. The ability to negotiate does not come naturally : it has to be learnt, but like

other skills, it is learnt through doing. Usually in school, the youngster's inadequacy in negotiation gives rise to the teacher's impatience and justifies to him his preempting all the decisions. This leaves the student unskilled, or even, since he is unlikely not to have developed some skill at negotiation and autonomy outside (if only to get himself there), de-skilled. The team provides the setting for the acquisition of these skills.

3. The epistemological solution is pointed to by Douglas Barnes in From Communication to Curriculum (Penguin 1976) where he says, 'The more a learner controls his own language strategies, and the more he is enabled to think aloud, the more he can be responsible for formulating explanatory hypotheses and evaluating them. It is not easy to make this possible in a typical lesson .... average pupils of secondary age are capable of this if they are placed in a social context which supports it.'

The Countesthorpe sub-school could be the setting for traditionally directive teaching. Instead, the occasion has been found for that 'social context which supports' those 'average pupils of secondary age' in the development of autonomy in their learning. It has above all been the context for an unusually continuous and prolonged dialogue between student and teacher, in a relationship that, while informal and non-coercive, is beyond that of friendship. In a perceptive paper entitled 'A Case for Conversation' (published in On Our Side. Order, authority and interaction in school, ed. Gerald Haigh, Maurice Temple Smith 1979) two of our teachers of English, Richard Martin and Jennifer Smith, wrote this -

> "What we hope to do in this chapter is to describe an opportunity. It is an opportunity afforded us in our teaching to 'associate well' with students, not just by knowing them, but also, by engaging with them in their learning, in a collaborative effort which can be

mutually exciting and rewarding. Such a view of learning provides the framework for considerations of discipline : behaviour problems and learning difficulties can become part and parcel of the relationship between student and teacher, rather than extraneous distractions which interfere with an already established curriculum. It is our experience that education must be fitted to the student, adapted to his particular needs and interests; learning, and the problems that accompany it, need to be made part of a continuous conversation between teacher and student. The opportunity we try to describe, then, is not one which merely eases the traditional relationship between teacher and student, but one which substantially alters the focus of that relationship, encouraging the student to direct and control the course of his own learning. It is learning, therefore, which is at the centre of the relationship and provides the framework for 'associating well'."

In effect, the tutor-student point of contact is that from which learning may take any angle of departure. In team, no teacher ever says 'that's outside my province'. He may say, 'I don't know much about that, but let's find out.' Or she may say, 'I may be able to help, so let's get the problem clear first. What is it you are trying to find out?' In other words, the conversation is maintained and developed, and the student's exploration is taken into areas where the teacher may need to hand over to someone else, but someone else located by her agency.

This has considerable implication for the skills that the teacher must have acquired, but I shall not pursue that here. The point here is that for the student, a) the programme of learning can become coherent, and b) the pursuit of understanding is more likely to result in knowledge becoming the student's

own, modifying his own picture of reality, rather than adding more furniture to the repository of stored information.

Those with misgivings about the practicality of such an open approach to learning may take heart from Martin and Smith. They write -

> "If the idea of doing without an established curriculum sounds alarming, it should be remembered that each lesson does not begin in chaos and continue in anarchy : for each student in each lesson there is a context, and work is seen as a continuum. There will be a hiatus when interest is lost or work completed, when new work needs to be initiated or ideas offered which will stimulate a new, even short-lived interest, but team allows time for conversation. It is through the continuing conversation between teacher and student that much of the learning advances; and conversation provides the metaphor for the manner in which the relationship is conducted : relaxed, informal, concerned."

4. <u>The Role of English</u> in this scheme has already been indicated in part. It is the way in which the 'team' is pervaded by exchanges of expressive language that creates the context for study, planned or spontaneous. Language provides the 'space' into which the teacher may permit the action to move. Furthermore, the conversation is also the very means by which much of the learning actually occurs. The role of language across the curriculum could hardly be better exemplified than in a 'team' base. As a non-mathematician, for instance, I have frequently found that when approached by a student or group of students with a maths problem, I have been able, by putting myself in the role of the learner, to promote the dialogue out of which the students, in the process of clarifying the problem for me, will arrive at the solution.

Secondly, English, spoken and written, is the unifying element of the curriculum. The specialist teacher of English in a 'team' will therefore be offered opportunity for maximising competence in well-diversified uses of English, while being well-placed, vis-a-vis colleagues of other specialisms, to discourage abuses, such as the production of heavily directive work-sheets, dependence on printed data at inappropriate reading levels, and other malpractices based upon false assumptions about English-related study skills.

As an example of such unified work arising from the opportunities of a 'team', let me quote from the writing of a group of fifteen-year-old students who became interested in the large sculpture by Philip King, which stands in the centre of the circular courtyard around which Countesthorpe College is built. This group, with their tutor (who is a Historian), set themselves the task of photographing this work. Called Dunstable Reel, it consists of six shapes cut in heavy steel plate welded at their points of contact into a ring.

> Lisa - In the centre of our school there is a modern art statue called 'The Dunstable Reel'. It was mounted when the school was just built. It was dreamed up by a famous artist and is worth a lot of money. Before studying it I had never taken much notice of it and to me it was just another peice of modern art. I thought photographing it would be great fun as there were so many different angles, curves and straight lines involved in it. We took photographs from all different positions, some even lying on the floor looking up at it. Then a friend and I made a model replica so then it was even easier to take weird shots.
>
> In one of the photos my hand was placed over part of the statue making it look very unusual. I also placed a mouse inside the statue but before I had pressed the shutter the mouse had disappeared to the end of the table. Many though were quite

successful although a few faults occured in the printing as it was my first attempt. If you look carefully on the photographs you can see fingerprints and white marks where specks of dust were.'

Here, it seems to me, we have a record of the way in which language may hold together a set of diverse experiences, presenting to the observant teacher and to the student herself the very nexus of perceptions from which may be teased out a host of learning routes.

Jan - 'I started off by drawing the straightened out sculpture. I then wondered whether the movement the reel has is entirely enclosed within or is some or all of it radiating out from it. I coloured the sculpture then repeated the lines of the sculpture as often as the paper would allow. Finally I painted over half of the lines to give the picture the light/dark aspect that the sculpture has.'

Jan later wrote an additional account of her analysis -

'After drawing the sculpture straightened out, I took the top continuous line and drew it on a fresh piece of paper. Then I turned the paper upside down and drew the line again. I drew the line again but drew it in reverse, starting from the opposite end, finally I reversed the paper and repeated the latter. The result was quite interesting, the same line drawn from different angles had produced an interesting pattern containing a lot of the movement from the sculpture.'

Finally Jan produced this poem -

Dipping, swooping, swinging, swaying,

Waking up, jumping into life,

Bow, courtesy,

Round again, round again, again,

Getting dizzy, stop.

Frozen in the last dance,

Still, cold,

Frozen in the death dance, forever,

Captured in the swirling movement never to move again, dead.

Even in this short space I cannot forbear to comment on the way that Jan's three pieces of writing illustrate for me the variety of forms that creative writing may take. The first two pieces, I would contend are as creative in their fitting of language to the complex explorative analysis of shape and pattern as is the poem which sets out to capture the emotional relationships she has discerned between cold steel and dancing. The important thing is that in each of the pieces she is pinning the experience down with her language so that the experience has validity for her, making it a part of her.

5. Pitfalls undoubtedly exist where English is taught in the integrated 'team'. There are special techniques that the teacher has to learn, although there is little case for saying that the system depends on outstanding teachers, and there is the special advantage that in this open system the novice is able to develop the techniques by sitting alongside Nelly (as long that is, as there is plenty of time between sessions for talking it over with Nelly and the others). However there are one or two specific reefs for the English staff to watch out for in this way of working.

i) Monitoring the progress of each individual has to be carefully co-ordinated across the 'team'. There is no group syllabus that will provide

the general route markers for the teacher and so careful plotting of work needs to be recorded if the student's enterprises are never to become disjointed or, more likely, repetitive. Paper records are necessary but are not the whole answer. The success of the 'team' system depends on each tutor taking advantage of the continuous contact to get to know each student well personally and not to allow their attention to be concentrated upon some at the expense of others. This makes for sub-standard teaching in a conventional classroom but in a 'team' it can be disastrous.

ii) In spite of the example that I have cited of a group task centring on the courtyard sculpture, there is a tendency for the individualised curriculum to promote individualised tasks at the expense of activities in which the major benefit arises from it involving a group with a teacher. However true it is that a book must in the end be read by an individual in private, there is no substitute for the group discussion under the guidance of a teacher. Such sessions can be organised within the 'team' system, but there lies the rub. They have to be planned and organised by the English teacher without the prompting that a normal timetable framework supplies. It is perfectly possible, but needs watching or else time slips by and a week or two may pass in intensive individualised activity with certain students never having sat down in a group for a lesson with the English specialist.

iii) Related to the danger of English lessons being abandoned, lives the danger of English being reduced to the servicing agency. Again, there is no reason to fear that this is inevitable, but a 'team' needs a strong English specialist, prompt with the justifications for English having its distinct contribution to make in the network of the curriculum rather than offering merely the means of retrieving information and making accurate records or notes.

iv) Although it does not always happen, one might expect in a school organised on departmental lines that English teaching will be given some unity

of outlook and approach by the leadership of the Head of Department and the team sense of the English specialists. In the Countesthorpe sub-school system, the 'teams' have such a degree of autonomy that the English Department ceases to have any identity. This is a source of potential weakness if only because there is no certainty of the strengths of the specialist staff being shared and spread. It could, in theory, lead to any one 'team' failing to provide specialist English other than as the servicing agency. At best it can lead to unnecessary repetition of such tasks as drawing up reading lists or over the printing of supplementary material.

6. Safeguards can be found, though it requires senior staff to be vigilant watchdogs. There has to be a guarantee that each 'team' will contain an English specialist who understands the nature of the function of language and literature in any curriculum grouping. Given that, then there is an enriched possibility of specialists in other subjects becoming suitably infected with enthusiasm for this conception of English, and we find them as eager to encourage a poem as a diagram.

Similarly, the function of an English Department can be largely replaced by regular liaison across the 'teams' between the English specialists. For this to happen at all requires either that the role of Head of Department still exists in an altered scale, or as happens at Countesthorpe, with its marked independence on hierarchy, that the English staff between them adequately share out the tasks of, for example, meeting-convenor, exam board representative, text book orderer, bookshop manager, and so on. Where this is successfully undertaken it can confer on each member a sense of increased professional responsibility. It is not only the student but also the teacher who needs to be enabled in Douglas Barnes's words 'to think aloud ... and be responsible for formulating explanatory hypotheses and evaluating them.' The 'team' system at Countesthorpe undoubtedly imposes extra burdens on its teachers,

but they seem positively to welcome them, perhaps because it is through these additional responsibilities that, like their students, they feel they have a stake in the whole curriculum and life of the school.

John Watts,
August 1980.